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The importance of literature in primary school pupils’ development and personal growth

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Abstract

Most educational systems present common features which have a strong emphasis on cognitive learning, where results can be measured objectively, the focus being on knowledge, skills and competences. Accordingly, competition and achievement do not produce enough preoccupation for the inner life of children. Literature holds a prominent role in children’s personal development since the reader becomes emotionally attached with the story and this has positive effects not only on the personal growth but also on the whole learning process. From this point of view, the Romanian curriculum for the primary school cycle includes appropriate texts which can be used to these purposes.

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1. Introduction

Teachers and learners in all educational systems are “subjected to the ideology of the institution, which itself responds to national and international imperatives”. (Kramsch, 2010, 67). Most educational systems present common features which are related to several aspects: rapid development of media, children’s abilities in communication and technologies, new teaching strategies and resources. On the whole, the scientific, positivistic world view generated policies and practices in the educational systems which have a strong emphasis on cognitive

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learning, where learning results can be measured objectively, the focus being on the accumulation on knowledge, skills and competences. These practices continue to the present time and it can be easily observed that students in the primary or secondary level do not experience learning in the areas that promote creativity and imagination, a problem which derives from the structure of a crowded curriculum.

Accordingly, competition, status and achievement do not produce enough preoccupation for the inner life of children. They tend to promote the outer side of the person, with little preoccupation for the inner self. This is highly obvious with the last generations of children who have been educated in a media environment which influences them to a large extent. Very often, children are left in front of the computer, for homework or simply for leisure, while at school educators may use a great variety of teaching strategies and resources, some of them also connected to the developments in technology.

2. Theoretical background

Recent trends in education have made it very difficult for teachers to help inspire the appreciation of literature in their students. Most surveys and researches emphasize the critical need for helping teachers to create a love of literature in students and showed a dramatic decline in literary and total book reading among all age groups and education levels.

As a result of all these, children and young people have a confused sense of self nowadays what is called a liquid identity (Bauman, 2000, 38), where nothing keeps in solid shape characterized by little constancy in the individual experience of being human. Consequently, the curriculum and class practice should give attention to spirituality, an important issue in nurturing the inner and outer lives of children. On other words, education should also be grounded on several fields and disciplines which can help children in their attempt to find meaning and connectedness in their lives (Souza, 2010, 34). To this purpose, literature holds a prominent role in children's personal development since it is not only a tool in language learning but also a source of personal growth for young learners.

The way learning with literature is shaped within different educational systems is influenced by current concepts of education ("Bildung"), of culture, aesthetics and literature, of language and learning. "Bildung" remains a central notion within Europe. Though the term is used and discussed in different ways it is commonly accepted that, with regard to society, subjects are being prepared for citizenship in order to participate in public life, to acquire the necessary abilities to conduct and shape their lives as a learning process despite the uncertainties of work, career and social situation. In the field of literature (literary education), the term is analyzed with regard to cultural life. The learning with literature should allow for personal development within a cultural context. Thus students should be introduced to the cultural life of society and they should be offered opportunities to participate. (Pieper, 2006, 6).

According to Collie and Slater (1990, 145) one of the main reasons teachers use literature in the classroom is language enrichment. Students use literary texts not only for information, they interpret them, decode their meaning and thus literature becomes an effective means of teaching language. Literature provides a language model for those who hear and read it. By using literary texts, students learn new words, syntax and discourse functions and they learn correct sentence patterns, standard story structures. They develop their writing skills. To this end, the dichotomy language-literature has been institutionalized in our curricula for the primary school. Moreover, for young learners, literature plays an important role in forming the reading skills but also in forming a reading habit. It is generally acknowledged that reading has become for the present generations a challenge which is rarely overcome.

3. Literature in the primary-school cycle

In point of communication, literature develops critical and analytical skills since pupils learn to work independently and present their arguments supported by the studied literary texts. Discussions of literature bring out reasoning related to sequence, cause and effect, character motivation, predictions, visualization of actions, characters, and settings, critical analysis of the story and creative responses.

Starting in the preschool years and continuing in the primary cycle, picture books used to support stories develop visual literacy. The creative illustrations in picture books develop children's awareness of line, color, space,

shape, and design. Some illustrations complement or reinforce the story, whereas others enhance or extend the text. Pictures convey meaning and open new opportunities for interpretation developing children's critical skills. Pictures can be used with poems such as *Balada unui greier mic* by G. Toparcanu, *Iarna* by Alecsandri; with tales such as *Croitorasul cel viteaz*, or with stories like *Condeiele lui voda*.

The study of literature encourages empathy, tolerance for diversity, imagination and emotional intelligence which is the understanding of feelings, both of one's own and the others. A piece of literature acts on the students' emotions, interests, remains in their memories because "represents the particular voice of the writer among the many voices of his/her community and thus to appeal to the particular in the reader" (Kramsch, 2010, 131).

Apart from these, the most important reason for using literature in the classroom is the personal development. It educates the reader, helps him form a set of values and form attitudes towards them. Literature can function as a change agent since good literature deals with some aspects of the human condition, and can thus contribute to the emotional development of the child, and foster positive interpersonal attitudes. These values and attitudes will be used outside the classroom. Literary pieces such as *Freamat de codru* by M. Eminescu and *Rapsodii de toamna* by G. Toparceanu function well to these purposes.

When reading or studying a text, the reader becomes emotionally attached with the story and the characters and this situation has positive effects not only on the personal growth but also on the whole learning process. As they read and understand the text, students are motivated and may foster a love of reading and literature. This is the case of many literary pieces in the primary school curriculum: *Hansel and Gretel*, *Amintiri din copilarie*, *Fat-Frumos*, *Un pedagog de scoala noua* and *Domnu Goe* by I.L. Caragiale

Literature helps children deal with their problems. By finding out about the problems of others through books, children receive insights into dealing with their own problems, a process called *bibliotherapy*. Children might identify with heroes from fairy-tales, fighting for the good ones, like Lizuca, the heroine from *Dumbrava minunată* by M. Sadoveanu, with heroes living their childhood adventures and events like Nică and his friends from *Amintiri din copilarie* by I. Creangă, *Harap-Alb* by I. Creanga, *Judecata vulpii* by P. Ispirescu or with the heroes and their adventures from *Făt Frumos din lacrimă* by M. Eminescu.

Literature provides pleasure to listeners and readers. It is a relaxing escape from daily problems, and it fills leisure moments. Making time for recreational reading and using high-quality literature help to develop enthusiastic readers and improve achievement. According to Rosenblatt (1995, 175), "The power of literature to offer entertainment and recreation is . . . still its prime reason for survival." Developing a love of literature as a recreational activity is possibly the most important outcome of a literature program.

Literature builds experience. Children expand their horizons through different experiences. They visit new places, gain new experiences, and meet new people. They learn about the past as well as the present and learn about a variety of cultures, including their own. They discover the common goals and similar emotions found in people of all times and places. Two examples of books that provide such experiences are *Legende Olimpului* by Al. Mitru and *Tinerete fără bătrânețe și viață fără de moarte*.

Teaching literature to children in the primary school cycle has many advantages as compared to the teaching to other age levels. Children are more receptive, more playful and enthusiastic. They also lose interest quickly and as their attention cannot be focused on a subject for a long time. That is why the teacher should use simple activities in teaching literature and focus on the learner. The purpose of introducing tales, stories and poems to the primary cycle is not only to develop speaking and thinking but also to offer behavioural models which will contribute to forming children's personality. Paradoxically enough, not logical arguments but aesthetic dimension and affection determine very often the ethical behaviour of the individual. Similarly, the central purpose of reading literature within primary school is to introduce students to literary reading in such a way that they can enjoy it and develop regular reading habits, who read a variety of texts representing diverse experiences and perspectives for different purposes, including personal fulfillment. From this point of view, the Romanian curriculum includes appropriate texts which can be used to these purposes. The examples presented are based on class experience and can be varied according to the class level.

Table 1: Activity type 1

Level	Primary
Objective	Language development through didactic play
Skill	Speaking

- The teacher chooses a didactic play- “old and new” based on *Amintiri din copilarie* by Ion Creanga
- Children are presented and explained the game they will play by the teacher
- Children perform the play under the teacher’s guidance (compare old and new words)
- The teacher sums up the verbal material which was aimed at by the play, analyzes and appreciates children’s activity
- Children are rewarded for their activity

Table 2: Activity type 2

Level	Primary
Objective	Creative thinking through images, aesthetic dimension
Skill	Speaking

- The presentation of the activity is made through a poem (*Rapsodii de toamna* by G.Toparceanu) or a surprise-material
- Children are showed a painting (ex. an image of autumn) and they begin to enumerate freely its elements
- The teacher formulates questions for the efficiency of the sequence. In order to make a synthesis they are asked questions (ex. What colours do we use to paint autumn?)
- Children are asked to find a title to the painting

Table 3: Activity type 3

Level	Primary
Objective	Aesthetic dimension development through memorization
Skill	Speaking, listening

- The teacher chooses a poem with an appropriate content: *Muma lui Stefan cel Mare* by D. Bolintineanu
- After announcing the title, the teacher recites two or three times the poem as a model lecture in order to underline its aesthetic value.
- The teacher explains the new words and discusses the text with children
- The poem is learnt by heart, in fragments. The first stanza is repeated until it is memorized, then the second, they are repeated together and then the other stanzas
- Children are asked to make short sentences with some words from the poem

Table 4: Activity type 4

Level	Primary
Objective	Creative thinking
Skill	Speaking

- The teacher presents a series of images about a poem- *Oaspetii primaverii* by V. Alecsandri , which are connected
- Pupils are divided into several groups
- Each group makes his own story based on the images presented by the teacher
- Each group presents their story
- The class chooses the most attractive story and the group who win are rewarded

Table 5: Activity type 5

Level	Primary
Objective	analysis, connecting information, vocabulary
Skill	Speaking

- The teacher brings a short historical film and the whole class watch the film
- Pupils are asked to describe the characters, the setting, the events
- The teacher recites *Penes curcanul* by Vasile Alecsandri
- The pupils are asked to give a short account of the poem
- Pupils are invited to present the connection between the two pieces

Table 6: Activity type 6

Level	Primary
Objective	Creative thinking, vocabulary
Skill	Writing, speaking

- The teacher writes verses from a poem on the blackboard and underlines the rhymes- *Freamat de codru* by M.Eminescu
- The teacher writes a series of simple words on the blackboard and asks pupils to find other words that rhyme with them (rece – trece, spus – dus, vazut-trecut)
- Pupils can be divided in groups to find the rhymes
- Pupils make short sentences with the words and after that a one stanza poem
- Everybody reads his/her poem. The poem can be the product of a group or of a single pupil

Table 7: Activity type 7

Level	Primary
Objective	Drama, role play, vocabulary
Skill	Speaking, listening

- The teacher reads a story which is based on the opposition *the good-the evil*, like *Fat-Frumos* de I. Creanga
- The teacher explain new words and phrases
- Pupils are divided into groups and are asked to retell the story by role-play
- They are told to use intonation, mimicry, gestures
- At the end, pupils are asked to classify the characters into good and evil and to motivate their choice

Table 8: Activity type 8

Level	Primary
Objective	vocabulary, parts of speech
Skill	Listening

- The teacher reads a poem in front of the classroom - *Iarna pe ulita* by G.Cosbuc
- The teacher explains new words and phrases
- The teacher also gives handouts containing the poem and a table with three columns :noun, verb, adjective
- Pupils are asked to put the words in the respective column

Table 9: Activity type 9

Level	Primary
Objective	Creative thinking, interpretation
Skill	Speaking, writing

- The teacher reads a story in front of the classroom
- The teacher explain new words and phrases
- After listening the story, the pupils are asked to make a short account of what they heard and then to find another end to the story
- Well-known fairy-tales can be used: *Aleodor Imparat*, *Frumoasa din padurea adormita*, *Harap-Alb*.

3. Conclusions

The modern trends in pedagogy put an end to the separation of language courses and literature courses and recommended a curriculum “in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole.” This contemporary view of the role of literature reinforces the notion that literary texts can be used to teach language beginning at the earliest levels. In addition to providing language models for children, literary selections also provide authentic cultural information, help critical thinking skills, and emphasize historical and literary traditions. The teaching of literature in primary school with appropriate pedagogic methods and means not only develops linguistic abilities but also offers behavioural models which will contribute to children’s personal fulfillment.

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